

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications  
and other research outputs

## Exploring teachers' knowledge of children's literature

### Journal Item

#### How to cite:

Cremin, Teresa; Mottram, Marilyn; Bearne, Eve and Goodwin, Prue (2008). Exploring teachers' knowledge of children's literature. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 38(4) pp. 449–464.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2008 University of Cambridge, Faculty of Education

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/03057640802482363>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

## **Exploring Teachers' Knowledge of Children's Literature**

Teresa Cremin\*, Marilyn Mottram, Eve Bearne and Prue Goodwin  
The Open University, UK; Birmingham Local Authority, UK; University of  
Cambridge, UK; University of Reading, UK

### **Abstract**

In the context of the current debate about teaching reading, research to ascertain primary teachers' personal and professional reading practices was undertaken. The study explored teachers' reading habits and preferences, investigated their knowledge of children's literature, and documented their reported use of such texts and involvement with library services. Questionnaire responses were gathered from 1200 teachers. The data were analysed and connections made between the teachers' own reading habits and preferences, their knowledge of children's literature, their accessing practices and pedagogic use of literature in school. This paper reports on part of the dataset and focuses on teachers' knowledge of children's literature; it reveals that primary professionals lean on a narrow repertoire of authors, poets and picture fiction creators. It also discusses teachers' personal reading preferences and considers divergences and connections between these as well as the implications of the teachers' limited repertoires on the reading development of young learners.

### **Introduction**

The teaching of reading in the primary phase remains a site of contestation and debate, particularly with regard to the manner and significance of phonics instruction (e.g. Wyse and Styles, 2007; Brooks, Cook and Littlefair, 2007; Goouch and Lambirth, 2007), and the reported decline in children's reading for pleasure (e.g. Sainsbury and Schagen, 2004; Clark and Foster, 2005). The former concern focuses

upon the kinds of knowledge and skills young readers need, the latter around readers' attitudes and interests, their dispositions and desires. Both connect vitally to teachers' professional knowledge and understanding and their use of children's literature and other texts as they seek to develop young readers who can and *do* choose to read.

It could be argued that the current international emphasis on phonics instruction in both the US and the UK has the potential to produce practice that is both fragmented and limited, practice in which the purpose of reading may be short-changed and the pleasures of literature sidelined. In England for example, in a recent Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading (Rose, 2006) the use of synthetic phonics is profiled and almost no explicit connections are made to children's books and meaningful motivating texts (Wyse and Styles, 2007). The 'simple view of reading' espoused in this review, encompasses a two-dimensional framework that separates decoding and comprehension which may focus the attention of teachers and young readers on words not meanings, sounds not sense. However, it is also possible to argue however that such a 'simple' model could encourage teachers to focus more explicitly on comprehension and response. Whichever perspective is adopted, what remains clear is that classroom practice is influenced by a myriad of factors, both local and national (Ellis, 2007), and that one of these is teachers' knowledge of children's literature. Such knowledge is surely a pre-requisite if teachers are to nurture positive attitudes and sustain and develop young readers.

Fostering such attitudes is crucial in the light of recurring evidence that suggests children in England continue to read somewhat less independently and find less pleasure in reading than many of their peers in other countries (Twist, Schagen and

Hodgson, 2003, 2007). Additionally, the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) reveals that reading attainment in England has fallen significantly since the 2001 PIRLS. The earlier PIRLS study, which involved comparing ten year olds in 35 countries, revealed that 13% of the English children disliked reading, compared to 6% on average. When asked how confident they were about reading, only 30% rated themselves as highly confident, compared to an international average of 40% (Mullis et al., 2003; Twist et al., 2003). In the 2006 study, which involved 41 countries, only 28% of the English children reported reading weekly compared to an international average of 40%. These results are in line with other studies such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2002) which, whilst focusing on older readers (15 year olds), revealed nearly 30% of the English students never or hardly ever read for pleasure; 19% felt it was a waste of time and 35% said they would only read if they were obliged to do so. This was despite high average scores in terms of attainment.

In this new media age, children's reading preferences and the nature and form of what they choose to read continues to change. Outside school children read a very diverse range of texts, with primary aged children reporting a preference for jokes, magazines, comics, fiction, TV books and magazines, signs, poetry and websites in that order (Clark and Foster, 2005). Similarly, other studies affirm that comics and magazines remain popular (Maynard et al., 2007) and that children prefer engaging with multimodal screen based texts (such as TV/DVD/video/the internet) over those composed mainly of words (e.g. Nestlé Family Monitor, 2003; UKLA, 2007). Whether there is a gap between what young children choose to read and what teachers provide as reading material (whether for in-class use or for private reading) is not

known, although such a gap has been noted by Ofsted (2003) in the secondary sector. The presence of such a gap in the primary phase also seems likely given the rapid advances in technologies and the challenge of keeping up-to-date with children's literature published in book form. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is clear both that 'linear and hypertext models of narrative exist in parallel and compromise is inevitable' (Hunt, 2000, p.118) and that more diverse literary forms need to be made available to youngsters in school. Recently, research into new texts and technologies has burgeoned, alongside examinations of accompanying pedagogic practice and professional development in this area (e.g. Mackey, 2002; Gee, 2003; Merchant, 2003), but with the notable exception of Arizpe and Styles's research into picture fiction (2003), much less attention has been paid to more traditional forms of children's literature. Whilst acknowledging textual diversity in mode and media, the research team which led this study, sought to redress the balance and identify teachers' knowledge and use of print based narratives, poetry and picture fiction in the primary classroom.

### **Children's literature in the classroom**

The place of literature in children's education has been held in a creative tension almost from the beginning of public education. The usefulness of reading and writing – their application across and beyond the curriculum – has an impact on literature's status as a creative art form, across and beyond the curriculum, especially on how children's knowledge and experience of it is assessed.

(Arts Council England, 2003, p.34)

This creative tension has been particularly evident since the introduction of the government's prescriptive framework for teaching literacy (DfEE, 1998) in England, and concerns have been voiced about the positioning of children's literature and its use in the classroom. In particular the practice of relying upon extracts, downloaded or purchased as part of publishers' packages, has been heavily criticised (Dombey, 1998; Frater, 2000; Sedgwick, 2001). Professional writers too have articulated their concerns, perceiving that their literary works are being subjected to inappropriate levels of analysis and that an atmosphere of 'anxiety' exists around reading literature (Powling et al., 2003, 2005). Many have argued that if comprehension and assessment are seen to dominate over reading and response, this will lead to reduced pleasure in texts and adversely influence children's desire to read (King, 2002; Martin, 2003; Woods, 2001; Cremin, 2007). There has also been a perception that teachers' creative use of literature is restricted by centralised systems and their attendant pedagogic practices (Marshall, 2001; Grainger, Gooch and Lambirth, 2005). Furthermore, it has been suggested that teachers' confidence in knowing and using children's literature may be limited, particularly by a lack of time to read personally for pleasure (Arts Council England, 2003).

Studies which have examined the most effective ways to teach literacy in the primary phase, show that teachers need much more than knowledge of reading skills and cueing systems; they also need extensive knowledge of children's literature (Medwell et al., 1998; Block, Oakar and Hurt, 2002). Primary teachers' knowledge of children's authors, poets and picture book creators is an assumed element of their professional repertoire; yet such knowledge is rarely included in any countries' list of required

teacher competencies. It is not included for example in the new Standards for Teachers (TDA, 2007) in England, and despite significant literacy training in recent years, little has been done to extend and develop teachers' familiarity with a wide range of children's literature.

Whilst research studies in the US highlight an apparent continuity between teachers and children as engaged and self motivated readers (Morrison et al., 1991; Bisplinghoff, 2003; Dreher, 2003; Commeyras, Bisplinghoff and Olson, 2003), in the UK and elsewhere scant attention has been given to teachers as readers themselves. In summarising much of the US research Dreher (2003) observes,

In short, teachers who are engaged readers are motivated to read, are both strategic and knowledgeable readers, and are socially interactive about what they read. These qualities show up in their classroom interactions and help create students who are in turn engaged readers.

(Dreher, 2003, p.338)

Arguably, as Cox and Schaetzel (2007, p.302) suggest, 'being a reader frames reading teachers' and offers support and encouragement as professionally they seek to apprentice younger readers and model their own love of reading. In the case studies documented by Rummel and Quintero (1997) for example, it is clear that the teachers' lives and classroom practices were strongly influenced by their pleasure in literature which nurtured both them and in turn their pupils. Yet at present the extent of primary teachers' knowledge of children's literature is unknown, for while several large scale studies of children's attitudes to reading and knowledge of literature have

been undertaken (Whitehead, 1977; Hall and Coles, 1999; Clark and Foster, 2005; Maynard et al., 2007), no studies have systematically documented primary teachers' reading habits and their knowledge and use of literature in the classroom.

### **The study**

In response to the context outlined above, the research team, drawn from the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) Children's Literature Special Interest Group, perceived it timely to undertake research into primary teachers as readers. The research sought to explore teachers':

- personal reading habits and preferences
- knowledge of children's literature
- reported use of children's literature in the primary classroom
- involvement in local area (YLG) /school library services (SLS).

The team collected questionnaire responses from 1200 primary teachers in 11 local authorities in England, as well as from a small number of student teachers in five Initial Teacher Training institutions. Approximately half the teachers completing the questionnaire worked with 5-7 year olds and half with 7-11 year olds.

The local authorities involved represented a spread of inner city, rural and suburban areas reflecting a broad range of socio-economic status. The questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was piloted with several groups of teachers and then adapted and finally administered on continuing professional development short courses during October - December 2006. Each authority appointed a designated research co-ordinator who completed context sheets and administered the questionnaire at courses which were not literacy related; the local authority co-ordinators sought to avoid gathering data on



courses specifically intended for school literacy coordinators. This meant that the research team could gain evidence of a more general picture of primary classroom teachers' habits, knowledge, experience and reported use of children's literature.

The questionnaire was completed and returned on the same day ensuring a high response rate and a wealth of data from teachers in different parts of the country, thus increasing the validity and reliability of the study. Both qualitative and quantitative information about teachers' views, knowledge and practices with regard to literature and to reading was sought; the former was subjected to categorical analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), the latter was inputted and analysed by a research assistant making use of the quantitative software package SPSS (no. 13). Information was also gathered about length of teaching experience, responsibilities in school and the age of the learners with whom the teachers were currently working.

Potential connections and relationships between the various strands of the research, namely the teachers' personal reading habits and preferences, their knowledge of children's literature, their reported use of such literature in the classroom and their involvement in library services were examined. This paper however only focuses upon the teachers' reported knowledge of children's literature, but in order to offer contextual information about them as readers, it commences with a brief acknowledgment of their personal reading practices and preferences.

### **Teachers' reading habits and preferences**

Nearly three quarters of the teachers had read for pleasure during the last month and a fifth during the last three months. Thus it seems that for the majority, reading remains a source of satisfaction. This finding is in tune with large scale studies which have consistently found that the vast majority of the population read (e.g. Book Marketing Ltd., 2000). Popular fiction, including women's popular fiction, thrillers and crime novels, was the most frequent choice of text named (40%). The next most frequent category of texts recorded were autobiographies and biographies, and other post 1980s novels (both 14%). A smaller percentage (6.5%) had recently read children's fiction, including novels which have also been widely read by adults, sometimes referred to as 'crossover' books. *Harry Potter* (JK Rowling) was top of this list and there were multiple mentions of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Mark Haddon).

On reflecting upon their favourite childhood reading, popular fiction was again the most frequently mentioned category (60 %), particularly the work of Enid Blyton and Roald Dahl, whose various titles were listed over 200 times. 10% of the teachers' favourites were 20<sup>th</sup> century classics such as *Black Beauty* (Anna Sewell), *Heidi* (Johanna Spyri) and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (C.S. Lewis). Picture books represented 9% of the total. Only 1.5% noted poetry as their favourite childhood reading although this may have been partly due to the question which referred to 'your favourite book as a child', triggering perhaps memories of a narrative text.

When choosing their most important book, whilst acknowledging that teachers may have interpreted this question in a variety of ways, it is clear that they discounted

popular fiction in favour of religious, spiritual, allegorical and exemplary books. These included not only the Bible, mentioned over 100 times, but also, for example, works with themes of morality and justice, including very recent as well as 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction. The responses included many classics, both from Europe and North America, which the teachers are likely to have studied in school as pupils. The pre-eminence of popular cultural texts in their current reading and favourite books from childhood is interesting, particularly in relation to their knowledge of children's literature. For a more detailed report on this element of the data see Cremin, Bearne, Mottram and Goodwin (2008a).

### **Teachers' knowledge of children's literature**

Part of the questionnaire invited the respondents to name half a dozen 'good' writers in the following categories: children's authors, poets and picture book authors/illustrators. Space was afforded for a list of six of each and the term 'good' was explained as referring to writers whose work the teachers had found both valuable and successful with primary aged children.

#### *Teachers' knowledge of children's authors*

When asked to list six 'good' children's writers, the responses indicate that a number of authors are known to primary practitioners, 48% of the teachers named six, 10% named two, one or no authors at all. Roald Dahl gained the highest number of mentions (744). The next in order of mention were: Michael Morpurgo (343), Jacqueline Wilson (323), J.K. Rowling (300) and Anne Fine (252). The only other authors who received above a hundred mentions were: Dick King Smith (172), Janet

and Alan Ahlberg (169), Enid Blyton (161), Shirley Hughes (128), C.S. Lewis (122), Philip Pullman (117), Mick Inkpen (106) and Martin Waddell (100).

Most of these writers are very well known, but the dominance of the first five authors places in shadow the myriad of other writers who were mentioned, such as Geraldine McCaughrean (10), Darren Shan (8), Berlie Doherty (5), Eva Ibbotson (3), Beverley Naidoo (3) and Jonathon Stroud (1). Few writers of novels for older readers were included in terms of range and diversity, and there was little mention of writers from other cultures or even writers writing about other cultures. Also despite the current popularity of fantasy novels and series fiction, there were few authors of this genre included, for example only one out of 1200 possible mentions was made each for Philip Reeve, William Nicholson and Chris D'Lacey.

#### *Teachers' knowledge of children's poets*

The data suggest that naming six 'good' poets was a more challenging task: 58% of the respondents named two, one or no poets, 22% named no poets at all and only 10% named six poets. Some of the named poets were also noted in the other categories (e.g. Allan Ahlberg and Roald Dahl). The highest number of mentions was for Michael Rosen (452) with five others gaining over a hundred mentions, namely: Allan Ahlberg (207), Roger McGough (197), Roald Dahl (165), Spike Milligan (159) and Benjamin Zephaniah (131). After these, only three poets were mentioned more than fifty times: Edward Lear (85), Ted Hughes (58) and A.A. Milne (57).

Very few women poets were mentioned; in the top twenty in order of numbers of mentions, only the last two were women poets. The highest numbers overall were

recorded for Grace Nicholls (16), Christina Rossetti (11), Eleanor Farjeon (9), Judith Nicholls (8) and Pam Ayres (5). Floella Benjamin, Sandy Brownjohn, Sharon Creech, Carol Ann Duffy and Jill Murphy each received three mentions, whilst Jackie Kay and Valerie Bloom received two and Wendy Cope just one. Whilst this is a matter of concern, it may reflect trends in anthologising and in the world of poetry more generally. Furthermore, with the notable exception of Benjamin Zephaniah, few black poets received any mentions. The repeated mentions which the Ahlbergs received and indeed Mick Inkpen, Shirley Hughes and Colin McNaughton suggest that much of the better known work, whilst perhaps poetic in nature, is found within the pages of well known and accessible picture fiction. The number of mentions that Roald Dahl received is presumed to be related to his book *Revoltin' Rhymes*.

#### *Teachers' knowledge of picture book authors/illustrators*

Nearly two thirds of the sample (62%) named two, one or no picture fiction creators, 24% named none at all and 10% named six. Some of these picturebook makers were also named as 'authors' in the first list and as poets in the second (e.g. Alhberg, Inkpen and Hughes). In addition, there was some inadvertent/inaccurate naming in this section, for example J.K. Rowling, Anne Fine, Jigsaw books and Graeme Green. The highest number of mentions by far was for Quentin Blake (423) with four others being mentioned over a hundred times: Anthony Browne (175), Shirley Hughes (123), Mick Inkpen (121) and Alan Alhberg (146). There were also 302 specifically named books whose authors were seemingly not known or were not able to be recalled by the teachers whilst completing the questionnaire. These were very varied and included for example multiple mentions of *A Piece of Cake* (Jill Murphy), *Pumpkin Soup* (Helen Cooper), *Can't You Sleep Little Bear* (Martin Waddell), *Going on a Bear Hunt*

(Michael Rosen), *Owl Babies* (Martin Waddell) and *Catkin* (Antonia Barber, illustrator P.J. Lynch), as well as a number of titles of traditional tales such as *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* and *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Other picture book creators who received over 50 mentions included: Eric Carle (81), Julia Donaldson (80), Martin Waddell (80), Nick Butterworth (78), Tony Ross (55) and Roald Dahl (51).

There were very few mentions of named picture book makers/illustrators who offer complex polysemic visual texts for older readers. For example, there was negligible mention of the work of Gary Crew (4), Marcia Williams (3), Philippe Dupasquier (2) Shaun Tan or Neil Gaiman(1 each) and no mention at all of David Wiesner or Colin Thompson. There were also some age phase differences in this picture fiction category: of the teachers working with children aged 5-7 years, 52% named two, one or no children's picture fiction creators, with 22% naming none at all and 14% naming six. Whilst of the teachers working with children aged 7-11 years, 66% named two, one or none, with 25% naming none and 8% naming six picture fiction creators. It is also interesting to note that teachers with the least years of teaching experience (0-5 years) were able to name a significantly smaller number of picture books creators than their more experienced colleagues. This was also the case for poetry and children's authors as a whole.

## **Discussion**

### *Limited by a primary canon*

It is not known whether the teachers' overdependence on a relatively narrow range of very well known writers is linked to the influential epithets enshrined in an earlier

National Curriculum (DfE, 1995) which state that for primary aged children the literary texts shared should be written by ‘significant children’s authors’. However it is possible that this requirement, which was expanded for children aged 7-11 years to include ‘long-established children’s fiction’, ‘good quality modern poetry’ and ‘classic poetry’ has remained influential. When the English National Literacy Strategy (NLS) (DfEE, 1998) was established, these categories were reiterated and detailed examinations of literary texts at word, sentence and text level ensued. It is perceived that historically, this labelling has shaped and framed the knowledge indicated by the teachers in this survey, whose repertoires it could be argued represent a primary canon of ‘significant’ children’s authors. Additionally, the media profile given to the top five authors mentioned in the survey, three of whom have been Children’s Laureates, may also be influential, as may the teachers’ childhood favourites many of which appear to be relied upon and revisited years later in the classroom. Whilst it is possible that other writers are known to the respondents and that in the context of the classroom with its attendant bookshelves, the teachers’ knowledge might have reflected a wider base, the number of responses which reflect a narrow range of writers remains a genuine cause for concern.

Many have argued that the inclusion of the term ‘significant authors’, served to institutionalise a cultural heritage model at the centre of English in schools (e.g. Benton, 2000; Maybin, 2000) and it has been suggested that ‘the work of a restricted number of children’s authors has become established as a classic set of texts with which primary children should become familiar’ (Marsh, 2004, p.255). The findings from this current research would appear to reinforce these views. It is possible that the establishment of this canon may have been strengthened in recent years by the

dominance of such ‘significant’ writers in the NLS web materials and other publications produced for teachers. The contribution of these writers to young children’s reading is not being contested, indeed they have an important role to play, but the creation of such a canon of texts and their potential purchase as class sets has implications for pedagogy and practice. It may contribute to the regulation and framing of the primary English curriculum, particularly in the later stages and may create situations in which teachers annually focus upon the same books, with all the challenge of stasis and loss of personal as well as professional interest that this may imply. The work of Roald Dahl for example remains very popular with teachers, yet surveys suggest that he is widely read by young people; the Roehampton Reading Surveys (undertaken in 1996 and 2005), indicate that Dahl was one of the top three favourite children’s authors in both years (Maynard et al., 2007, p.57-58) and in the National Literacy Trust survey he was the second most frequently read author noted by 10-11 year olds (Clark and Foster, 2006). His work is also likely to be well known to parents and grandparents, suggesting that it is perhaps time for the profession to look further afield for writers to introduce to young readers. Whilst developing in-depth knowledge of the work of particular authors is important, breadth and diversity also remain crucial if children are to be extended and challenged as readers.

#### *Limited poetic resonance*

In relation to poets, the teachers in this survey appeared only able to name a few. They tended to lean towards those whose poetry might be seen as light-hearted or humorous (e.g. Rosen, Dahl, Ahlberg or Milligan) and towards the work of poets whose work is likely to be studied as examples of ‘classic poetry’ (e.g. Rossetti, Shakespeare, Browning, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Stevenson, Hughes, Milne).



Arguably the work of over a quarter of the poets named could be assigned to the category 'classic poetry'. As a recent report on poetry notes, since the majority of primary teachers are not English specialists and 'tend not to be keen or regular readers of poetry' they may rely upon poets or poems they know from their own childhood or on poems presented in publishers' resources (Ofsted, 2007, p.13). There was evidence of the former in the survey results, since of the poems named by title, these were mostly classics which teachers were likely to have studied in their own school days (e.g. R.L. Stephenson's 'From a Railway Carriage' and W.H. Davies' 'Leisure'). The findings led the researchers to wonder whether some teachers are focused more on poems than poets, and whether they are using poetry to teach literacy at the relative expense of reading and responding to poetry for its own sake. Whilst recent research has suggested that an emphasis on poetic form and feature has begun to dominate primary practice (Hull, 2001; Wilson, 2005; Grainger et al., 2005), it is not known whether the teachers in this survey were selecting individual poems for instructional purposes or as models to imitate, both of which have been noted as common features of primary practice (Ofsted, 2007).

Based on these findings from 1200 teachers working in 11 different local authorities across England, it could be argued that the marked lack of knowledge of poets of primary practitioners is restricting children's access to poetic voices in all their diversity. They are not currently in a position to recommend, read from or share pleasure in the work of women poets or poets from different cultures and may not be knowledgeable enough about poetry to introduce children to a sufficiently wide selection to interest, engage and challenge them as young readers. In the Roehampton survey (aged 4-16), well over half the children did not respond to the question about

their ‘favourite book of poems or favourite person who writes poems’. Of those who did respond many noted that they did not have a favourite, did not know or did not read poetry (Maynard et al., 2007, p.60). Without an informed teacher who reads and recommends the work of different poets perhaps this is not surprising.

### *Limited knowledge of picture fiction*

What is surprising however, especially given the wealth of books available which exploit both word and image, is that primary teachers’ knowledge was poorest in this area. In terms of multiple mentions, a small group of the rich range of authors/illustrators who are publishing for children today were mentioned and this is problematic, especially since a relatively large number of authors/creators of other kinds of book were inadvertently mentioned in this category. It is worth noting that many of the picture book makers who received numerous mentions create texts largely targeted at 0-7 year olds, that knowledge of authors who create more complex visual texts targeted at older readers was limited, and that teachers of older readers knew less picture fiction authors. What is also worrying is the remarkably large number of teachers who work with children aged 5-7 years who found it hard to name just half a dozen picture book creators. It may be that many of these named book titles instead, but this is of little help to children whose tentative early journeys as readers could be nurtured through an affinity for a particular Shirley Hughes’ character or Martin Waddell’s writing. Young readers deserve to be introduced to the notion of authorship and to develop their pleasure and preferences for writers and illustrators.

The data that suggest teachers with less experience in the profession knew fewer picture book creators are also of interest. Whether these teachers were predominantly

‘functional’ or ‘detached’ readers as in a study into pre-service teachers as readers in Singapore is not known (Cox and Schaetzel, 2007), but it may suggest that recently trained teachers have engaged in a less literature informed curriculum, both perhaps in their training institutions and in their school based experience. This finding may also relate to the time needed to build such a repertoire, especially for mature students, whose own memories of childhood books may be somewhat distant.

In this picture fiction category, the work of the established canon of significant writers is again evident, for example Quentin Blake is widely mentioned, influenced perhaps by his role as Children’s Laureate and exhibitions of his work. Although whether he is known for his own texts *such as Zagazoo* or *Clown* or his many illustrations of Roald Dahl’s books such as *The Twits*, *The Giraffe*, *the Pelly and Me*, *The Enormous Crocodile* and *Revolting Rhymes* is unknown. His popularity does however correlate with the findings from the fiction and poetry categories which indicate that Dahl is pre-eminent within his field in terms of teachers’ knowledge of his work.

## **Conclusions and implications**

It is clear from this dataset of 1200 primary teachers from across England that the majority are readers; three quarters had made time for their own independent reading within the last month. It is also clear that many of their own childhood favourites and poems which were introduced to in school, are still popular with them. However, in considering their ability to name six children’s authors, poets and picturebook makers, it is questionable whether they know a sufficiently diverse range of writers to enable them to foster reader development and make informed recommendations to emerging

readers with different needs and interests. The lack of professional knowledge and assurance with children's literature which this research reveals and the minimal knowledge of global literature indicated has potentially serious consequences for all learners. Particularly those from linguistic and cultural minority groups who may well be marginalised unless teachers' own reading repertoires can be expanded.

Furthermore, the infrequent mention of poetry in teachers' personal reading and their lack of knowledge of poets, as well as the relative absence of women poets and poets from other cultures writing in English is also a concern, as is the dearth of knowledge of picture book creators, and the almost non-existent mention of picture book writers for older readers.

It is debatable therefore whether teachers are familiar with a wide enough range of children's authors in order to plan richly integrated and holistic literacy work. The evidence suggests that if units of work or author studies are undertaken they are likely to be based around the work of writers from the canon, whose writing may already be very well known to children. The wide popularity and teacher reliance on the prolific work of Dahl may restrict children's reading repertoires, since child-based surveys suggest he is also a core author of choice for children. This convergence of choice by adults and children is likely to narrow the range still further.

Teachers surely need to be able to recommend books to individual learners, suggesting named authors and actual books which will excite their imaginations, foster their desire and enhance their pleasure in reading. It is argued that the choice of books and teachers' mediation of them has a profound effect on 'how [children] see

themselves and who they want to be' (McCarthy and Moje, 2002, p.237) and informed recommendations can enhance both progression and development. Lamentably however, evidence suggests that few children perceive that their teachers help them choose books, in contrast, mothers are seen to play a key role in recommending texts and connecting children with books for personal reading (Maynard et al., 2007). Mothers however are likely to draw upon the same canon of well known authors, many of whom have attained celebrity status and whose work is accessible, available and heavily promoted.

Placed alongside the internationally documented decline in reading for pleasure in England (Twist et al., 2003, 2007), the reduction in primary phase book spending (Hurd et al., 2006), and the lack of teacher knowledge of children's literature evidenced in this research, there is a real need for increased professional attention and support in this area. Practitioners need ongoing opportunities to enrich this critical knowledge base and need to know how and where to access advice about books and writers. Whilst librarians could be central to this, evidence both in the US and in England, suggests their expertise is not well utilised (Ofsted, 2004; Ross, McKechnie and Rothbauer, 2006; Cremin et al., 2007b). Teachers' knowledge also deserves broadening in other ways, to encompass both the knowledge that develops through being a reader, and the rich pedagogical content knowledge that can support the development of independent, reflective and creative readers. Alongside gaining insights into their own practices and habits as readers, more emphasis is needed in this era of personalisation, on teachers working from children's own reading interests and preferences as they seek to introduce them to texts which motivate, build reading stamina and foster what Britton (1993) has called a 'legacy of past satisfactions'.

Professional development is urgently required to help diversify and widen teachers' repertoires enabling them to revisit the role of literature in the growth of young readers.

As far as teacher training is concerned, it remains remarkable that no statutory requirement exists for trainees to read and study children's literature. Whilst trainee teachers in England are expected to review their subject knowledge, the English skills audit fails to include any mention of children's literature. To become effective reading professionals, student teachers arguably need to understand the significance of developing their knowledge about and pleasure in literature and need to become well acquainted with the widest possible range of children's authors. The audit surely requires widening and projects like *Literature Matters* (2004-6) need to be resurrected or re-developed. This Arts Council initiative sought to profile reading for pleasure through building partnerships between libraries and initial teacher training institutions, but while some significant successes were reported, the work was not developed in a sustainable manner (Bailey, Hall and Gamble, 2007).

If children are to read more independently and to find more pleasure in what they read more needs to be done to support teachers so they can match texts to readers and readers to texts and provide wider and more engaging experiences of children's literature. This is a key aim of the new UKLA project 'Teachers as Readers: Building Communities of Readers' (2007-8) which is designed to develop children's pleasure in reading through enriching teachers' knowledge and skilful use of children's literature and their relationships with librarians and parents. This Esmée Fairbairn funded research is being documented as a series of case studies drawn from the five

Local Authorities involved: Barking and Dagenham, Birmingham, Kent, Medway and Suffolk. In particular, the study seeks to explore the concept of Reading Teachers: teachers who read and readers who teach (Commeyras et al., 2003) and to investigate the range of reading which teachers and children engage in both at home and school. It is hoped that in National Year of Reading such work will provide models of professional development and insights into the dynamic interplay between teachers' and children's knowledge and pleasure in reading literature and other texts.

### **Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to acknowledge the grant awarded by the United Kingdom Literacy association (UKLA) which made this work possible, and the time given both by the 11 local authority research co-ordinators and Ruth Rogers from Canterbury Christ Church University,

### **References**

- Arizpe, E. and Styles, M. (2003) *Children Reading Pictures: interpreting visual texts* (London, Routledge Falmer).
- Arts Council England (2003) *From Looking Glass to Spy Glass: a consultation paper on children's literature* (London, Arts Council).
- Bailey, M. Hall, C. and Gamble, N. (2007) Promoting school libraries and school library services: problems and partnerships *English in Education* 41(2), 71-85.
- Benton, M (2000) Canons ancient and modern: the texts we teach *Educational Review* 52(3), 269-277.
- Bisplinghoff, B.S (2003) Teachers planning as responsible resistance *Language Arts* 80(3), 119-128.

- Block, C., Oakar, M., & Hurt, N. (2002) The expertise of literacy teachers: a continuum from preschool to Grade 5 *Reading Research Quarterly* 37(2), 178-206.
- Book Marketing Limited (2000) *Reading the Situation: Book Reading, Buying and Borrowing Habits in Britain* (London, Library and Information Commission).
- Brooks, G. Cook, M. and Littlefair, A. (2007) Responses to Wyse and Styles' article, "Synthetic phonics and the teaching of reading: the debate surrounding England's 'Rose Report'" *Literacy* 41(3), 169-176
- Britton, J. (1993) *Literature in its Place* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook/Heinemann).
- Clark, C. and Foster, A. (2005) *Children's and Young People's Reading Habits and Preferences: the who, what, why, where and when* (London, National Literacy Trust).
- Commeyras, M. Bisplinghoff, B.S. and Olson, J. (2003) *Teachers as Readers: perspectives on the importance of reading in teachers' classrooms and lives* (Newark, International Reading Association).
- Cox, R. and Schaetzel, K. (2007) A preliminary study of pre- service teacher as readers in Singapore: prolific, functional or detached *Language Teaching Research* 11(3), 300-316.
- Cremin, T. (2007) Revisiting reading for pleasure: diversity, delight and desire in K. Goouch and A. Lambirth (eds) *Teaching Phonics, Teaching Reading: critical perspectives* (Milton Keynes, Open University) 166-190.
- Cremin, T. Bearne, E. Goodwin, P. and Mottram, M. (2008a) Primary teachers as readers *English in Education* 42(1), 1-16.
- Cremin, T. Bearne, E. Goodwin, P. and Mottram, M. (2008b) Teachers' reading and links with libraries *Library and Information Update* Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals 7(6), 40-43.



- DfE (1995) *Key Stages 1 and 2 of the National Curriculum* (London, Department of Education)
- DfEE (1998) *The National Literacy Strategy Framework for Teaching* (London, Department for Education and Employment).
- Dombey, H. (1998) Changing literacy in the early years of school, in B. Cox (ed.) *Literacy is not Enough* Manchester: Manchester University Press and Book Trust. 125-132.
- Dreher, M. (2003) Motivating teachers to read *The Reading Teacher* 56(4), 338–40.
- Ellis, S. (2007) Policy and research lessons from the Clackmannanshire synthetic phonics initiative *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 7(3), 281-297.
- Frater, G. (2000) Observed in practice, English in the National Literacy Strategy: some reflections *Reading* 34(3), 107–12.
- Gee, J.P. (2003) *What Video Games have to Teach us about Learning Literacy* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan).
- Goouch, K. and A. Lambirth (2007) (eds) *Teaching Phonics, Teaching Reading: critical perspectives* (Milton Keynes, Open University).
- Grainger, T. Goouch, K. and Lambirth, A. (2005) *Creativity and Writing: developing voice and verve in the classroom* (London, Routledge).
- Hall, C. and Coles M. (1999) *Children's Reading Choices* (London, Routledge).
- Hull, R. (2001) What hope for children's poetry? *Books for Keeps* 126:10-13.
- Hunt, P. (2000) Future's for Children's Literature: evolution or radical break? *Cambridge Journal of Education* 30(1) 111-119
- Hurd, S. Dixon, M. and Oldham, J. (2006) Are low levels of book spending in primary schools jeopardising the National Literacy Strategy? *The Curriculum Journal* 17(1), 73-88.

- King, C. (2001) "I like group reading because we can share ideas" – the role of talk within the literature circle *Reading, Literacy and Language* 35(1), 32–6.
- Mackey, M. (2002) *Literacies across Media: playing the text* (London and New York, Routledge/Falmer).
- Marsh, J. (2004) The Primary Canon: A critical review *British Journal of Educational Studies* 52(3), 249-262
- Marshall, B. (2001) 'Creating danger: the place of the arts in education policy' in A. Craft, B. Jeffrey and M. Liebling (eds) *Creativity in Education* (London, Continuum) 116-125.
- Martin, T. (2003) Minimum and maximum entitlements: literature at key stage 2 *Reading Literacy and Language* 37(1), 14-17.
- Maybin, J. (2000) The literary canon: historical construction and contemporary challenges in J. Davison and J. Moss *Issues in English Teaching* (London, Routledge) 180-195.
- Maynard, S. Mackay, S. Smyth, F and Reynolds, K. (2007) *Young People's Reading in 2005: the second study of young people's reading habits* (Loughborough and Roehampton, USU and NCRCL).
- McCarthy, S.J. and Moje, E.B. (2002) Identity matters *Reading Research Quarterly* 37(2), 228-238.
- Medwell, J., Wray, D., Poulson, L. and Fox, R. (1998) *Effective Teachers of Literacy: A Report of a Research Project Commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency* (Exeter, University of Exeter).
- Merchant, G. (2003) Email me your thoughts: digital communication and narrative writing *Reading Literacy and Language* 37(3), 104-110.
- Morrison, T., Jacobs, J. Swinyard, W. (1999) Do teacher who read personally use

- recommended literacy practices in their classrooms? *Reading Research and Instruction* 38(2), 81-100.
- Mullis, I.V.S., Martin, M.O., Gonzalez, E.J. and Kennedy, A.M. (2003) *PIRLS 2001 International Report: IEA's Study of Reading Literacy Achievement in Primary Schools* (Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College).
- Nestlé Family Monitor (2003) *Young People's Attitudes towards Reading* Croydon: Nestlé.
- OECD (2002) *Reading for Change: performance and engagement across countries: results from PISA 2002* (New York, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development).
- Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) (2003) English Dissemination conference SSI 1992-2002 (Unpublished conference proceedings) quoted in Hopper, R. (2005) What are teenagers reading? Adolescent fiction reading habits and reading choices *Literacy* 39(3), 113-120.
- Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) (2004) *Reading for Purpose and Pleasure: an evaluation of the teaching of reading in primary schools* (London, OfSTED).
- Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) (2007) *Poetry in Schools: a survey of practice 2006/7* (London, OfSTED).
- Powling, C. Ashley, B. Pullman, P., Fine, A. and Gavin, J. (eds) (2003) *Meetings with the Minister* (Reading, National Centre for Language and Literacy).
- Powling, C. Powling, C. Ashley, B. Pullman, P., Fine, A. and Gavin, J. (eds) (2005) *Beyond Bog Standard Literacy* (Reading, National Centre for Language and Literacy).
- Rose, J. (2006) *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* (Nottingham,

- DfES Publications).
- Ross, C.S. McKechnie, L. and Rothbauer, P.M. (2006) *Reading Matters: What research reveals about reading, libraries and community* (Westport, Libraries Unlimited).
- Rummel, M. K. and Quintero P. (1997) *Teachers' Reading/Teachers' Lives* (Albany, State University of New York Press).
- Safford, K, O'Sullivan, O. & Barrs, M. (2005) *Boys on the Margin: promoting boys' literacy learning at Key Stage 2* (London, CLPE).
- Sainsbury, M. and Schagen, I. (2004) Attitudes to reading at ages nine and eleven. *Journal of Research in Reading* 27(4), 373-386.
- Sedgwick, F. (2001) *Teaching Literacy: a creative approach* (London, Continuum).
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1998) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Newbury Park, CA, Sage).
- Training and Development Agency for Schools *QTS Requirements and ITT Standards* (Accessed online at: <http://www.tda.gov.uk/partnersittstandards> June 2008)
- Twist, L., Schagen, I. and Hodgson, C. (2003) *Readers and Reading: the national report for England PIRLS* (Slough, NFER).
- Twist, L., Schagen, I. and Hodgson, C. (2007) *Readers and Reading: the national report for England PIRLS* (Slough, NFER).
- United Kingdom Literacy Association (2005) *UKLA Submission to the Rose Review*. (Accessed online at: <http://www.ukla.org> January 2008).
- United Kingdom Literacy Association (2007) *Reading on Screen* Research undertaken for QCA (Leicester, UKLA)
- Whitehead, F. (1977) *Children and their Books: the final report of the Schools Council Project on children's reading habits, 10-16* (Basingstoke, Evans /Methuen Educational).

Wilson, A. (2005) The best forms in the best order? Current poetry writing pedagogy at KS2 *English in Education* 39(3), 19-31.

Woods, P. (2001) Creative literacy in A. Craft, B. Jeffrey & M. Liebling (eds) *Creativity in Education* ( London, Continuum) 62-79.

Wyse, D. and Styles, M. (2007) Synthetic phonics and the teaching of reading: the debate surrounding England's 'Rose Report,' *Literacy* 41(1) 35-42.

Appendix I: The Teachers as Readers Questionnaire